VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE OF THE BLIND

by Evelyn C. McKay

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VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE OF THE BLIND

Vocational guidance—the process of helping an individual to select, prepare for, enter upon, and progress in an occupation—is basically the same for the blind as for the seeing in principle and procedure. The factor of blindness, however, involves some modification of the usual techniques, and special emphasis on certain factors which are particularly important in the vocational success of blind individuals.

Definition of blindness. The term "the blind" includes not only those who are totally without the perception of light, but also those who have a considerable residue of vision. Blindness is commonly defined as "insufficient vision for the ordinary activities of life for which sight is required (e.g. reading)."

In ophthalmological terms this is expressed as "central visual acuity no greater than 20/200 in the better eye with correcting lenses; or central visual acuity greater than 20/200 accompanied by a limitation in the fields of vision such that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angle no greater than 20 degrees."

Central visual acuity refers to the area of acute vision in the central part of the retina, which is used for reading, writing, and other close work. The peripheral areas of the retina are areas of less acute vision but by their position enable the individual to perceive objects not directly in front of him, as, for instance, the approaching automobile. Some pathological conditions of the eye destroy central visual acuity without affecting the peripheral field of vision. On the other hand, certain diseases of the eye may destroy the peripheral vision but leave a small area of acute vision in the center of the retina unimpaired, sometimes referred to as "gun-barrel vision." Both types of visual handicap are included within the definition of blindness as stated above.

It is to be noted that the definition of blindness refers to vision in the better eye, and an individual who is blind in only one eye is not considered blind. Similarly, the definition calls for measurement of vision with lenses giving maximum correction of refractive error, and an individual whose visual acuity can be improved to more than 20/200 by the use of eye-glasses is not included in the blind group.

Basic Principles of Guidance for the Blind

The basic principles of vocational guidance of the seeing are applicable for the blind—the individualized approach, the partici-

pation of the counselee in the guidance process, the "long view" in planning, and the objective evaluation of individual abilities in the light of occupational requirements. Because of traditional limitations on employment of the blind, by which blind persons were expected to follow one of the so-called "blind trades," however, it is important to emphasize the positive approach and to help the blind individual achieve an occupational goal based on his vocational assets—abilities, interests, training, etc.—not on his handicap of loss of sight.

Vocational Information

Information about vocations which can be successfully carried on without physical vision is limited and, in some areas, fragmentary. Such research as has been done has been almost entirely restricted to compilation of data about occupations in which certain blind individuals are known to have achieved some degree of success.

The limited information available shows that blind persons have competed successfully with the seeing in hundreds of jobs, representing almost every field of employment, including the following:

Agriculture

Farmer
Dairy farmer
Truck farmer
Poultry farmer
Apiarist

Transportation and Communication

Laborers, streets and roads
Manager, trucking business
Telephone operator

Trade

Oil land promoter
Merchandise marker
Commercial traveler
Coffee taster
Insurance agent
Manager, employment agency
Executive (business)
Real estate dealer

Public Service

Tax collector
Secretary, school board
Member, public service commission
Representative in legislature
Collector of customs
U. S. Senator
Justice of the Peace

Retail Dealers

Book dealer
Shoe merchant
Standkeeper, news and confectionary
Clothing-store keeper
Coal, wood, and ice dealer
Dry goods dealer
Grocer
Furniture dealer
Fruit dealer

Hardware dealer
Dealer in musical instruments
Produce dealer
Stationery dealer
Salesman

Clerical Occupations

Publicity agent
Advertising manager
General clerical worker
Dictaphone operator
Stenographer
Typist

Domestic and Personal Service

Manager, barber shop
Manager, poolroom
Rooming-house keeper
Housekepper
Hotel-keeper
Janitor
Laundry worker
Restaurant keeper
Dishwasher
Domestic

Professions

Entertainer (musical)
Author
Journalist
Editor
Clergyman
College professor
Lawyer
Judge
Composer (music)
Organist
Pianist
Singer
Music teacher
Musical director
Bandmaster
Commercial Player (theater)
Osteopath
Teacher, school for the blind
Teacher, school for the seeing
Librarian (dept. for the blind)
Chiropractor
Dramatic reader
Masseur
Superintendent of institution
Evangelist
Executive (agency for blind)
Home teacher
Social worker
Physician's assistant

Factory Operations

Assembly work (automobiles, nuts and bolts, locks, vacuum cleaners, telephones, electric specialties)
Inspecting auto axles, auto valves, shoes, camera parts)
Stuffing upholstery
Buffing (metal)
Drill-press operating
Punch-press operating
Packing (needles, cans, candy, cards, novelties)
Core making (foundry)
Riveting, safety razors
Racking, window pulleys
Stringing jewelry
Washing machine parts
Armature winding
Screw setting (furniture)
Crating veneers
Foreman, dye-room
Inverting bags
Shaping gloves
Sorting shoe findings
Folding boxes
Stoning dates
Building fields for sweepers
Inspector of shells

Factory Operations (Continued)

Inspecting for spots and cracks (by touch)
Splitting and sorting mica
File-testing for hardness of bearing parts
Sound-testing bearings for quiet
Wiring sheet metal parts to rods for heat treatment
Sub-assembly work (precision bench)—assembling bomb releases, control valves, etc.
Finishing parts on small lathe, locomotive plant
Thimbling ends of shoulder straps and kit straps, tent factory
Rope tying and stretching, tent factory
Army ordnance inspector, heat control plant
Sorting parts for tool crib
Milling-machine operator, gun sight plant
Air-testing water-tight compartments, shipbuilding yard
Gauging cartridges (go-and-no-go gauge), arms plant
Chipping castings, arms plant
Gauging gun parts, arms plant
Polishing aluminum
Finish filing brass parts for nautical instruments
Bench work, motor assembly
Assembling nuts and bolts, motor assembly
Counting and packing small auto parts
Filing burrs from small steel stampings, auto plant
Plug-gauging pinion gears, auto plant
Assembling split bushings, auto plant
Checking blanks for spacer rings for bearings
Checking size of bore of cones for airplane motors
Honing out the bore of cones for airplane motors (machine job)
Reaming precision work
Burring aluminum parts
Sheet metal assembly
Crystal grinding, aircraft accessories
Operating tube flaring machine
Preparing material for hydro-press
One-shot riveting
Sub-assembly work—fire extinguishers, thermos bottle holders, gas tank caps, terminal blocks, etc.
Testing radio transmitters
Assembling sway braces for bomb racks (airplane plant)
Handling parts on a conveyor
Building fuse panels (airplane plant)

Unfortunately little organized information is available as to either the detail of duties performed in these positions or the special techniques by which the blind worker accomplished those parts of the work for which vision is normally required.

Most persons active in work with the blind are agreed that the

types of work in which blind people have actually functioned successfully represent but a small fraction of the jobs which can be done without sight but have not yet been explored.

The labor shortage during World War II afforded greatly expanded opportunities for demonstration of additional jobs that could be performed without sight, and the list continues to be supplemented by jobs in the new post-war industries.

In discovering new occupational opportunities for the blind increasing use is being made of job analyses and occupational studies compiled for use in the employment of the seeing, and it seems likely that future studies of occupations for the blind will be based on such material with appropriate adaptations to meet the limitations of blindness.

Counselling

The principal tool for the counsellor of the blind is the interview. Because the blind individual cannot see his surroundings or his interlocutor, special attention must be given to putting him at ease, explaining to him any interruption or unexpected incident which occurs during the conversation, and by warmth of tone and handclasp establishing a closer rapport.

In the inventory of the individual's qualifications, besides the usual records of school achievement and work experience, an ophthalmologist's report on the eye condition is essential. Such a report should include age at onset of blindness, diagnosis of the eye condition and its underlying cause (etiological factor), a statement of the amount of vision remaining, with and without glasses, recorded for each eye separately, and, in case of an involvement of the peripheral field, a notation of the field limitation. The opthalmologist's recommendations as to activities to be avoided is also valuable.

The diagnosis of the eye condition and its underlying cause is important for several reasons. It may indicate activities which should be avoided in order to prevent further impairment of vision. (e.g. Persons threatened with detachment of the retina should not engage in bending, heavy lifting, or activities in which they are subject to jarring or sudden shock.) The underlying cause of the eye condition may have produced other physical affects besides blindness which deserve consideration (e.g. diabetes may impair acuity of touch.) Certain eye conditions are aggravated by exposure to dust, or to strong light; others are progressive and result eventually in total blindness despite all care.

The amount of vision remaining is another important factor

since it frequently determines the practicability of certain types of work. The individual who can distinguish colors or indentify large objects may frequently perform satisfactorily job operations which are impossible for one who is totally blind. The person whose peripheral vision is unimpaired can go about in the community with comparative ease, whereas the worker with a severely restricted field of vision is handicapped in travel but may be able to do some reading.

Age at onset of blindness is a third determining factor. Those who are born blind or lose their sight in infancy have no visual images of the world about them and must form their concepts by hearing and touch, or from the verbal descriptions of the seeing. Through the unavoidable restrictions of such concepts, and because of limited life experiences, they may frequently lack the background and general information necessary in some occupations. Those who lose their sight in adult life, however, after having acquired education and work experience, can depend on visual memory and will more quickly grasp the nature of objects and situations, so that they are able to qualify for many occupations which, without such background of experience, would be closed to them.

Occupational potentialities are so greatly affected by these three factors of cause of blindness, amount of vision, and age at onset, that the ophthalmological report is an essential tool for the counsellor of the blind. Moreover, the differences between blind individuals in respect to these factors constitute one of the basic reasons why it is necessary to emphasize the individualized approach and avoid generalization.

Tests

Vocational tests, which play so great a part in counselling of the seeing, have until recently been largely unavailable for counsellors of the blind. This is due to the fact that, since most tests require visual observation, or eye-hand co-ordination, considerable adaptation is usually necessary before they can be used for those who do not see.

If the test is put into braille (the embossed type which the blind read by touch), allowance must be made for the greater time required to read or write braille as compared with ordinary print. If the test is to be given to persons who lost their sight so young that they have no visual memories, substitutions of subject matter may be necessary in order to provide content which has realistic meaning for the blind individual. Even if the test is purely mechan-

ical in nature, its standardization presents considerable difficulty because of the comparatively small number of blind people available for testing in any one community and the heterogeneity of the group in respect to such characteristics as present age, amount of vision, age at onset of blindness, and background of education and experience. Because of these technical problems little has been accomplished in providing reliable tests for use in vocational counselling of the blind.

Intelligence Tests. More progress has been made in the area of intelligence tests for the blind, than with other types of tests. Experiments in the adaptation of the Binet-Simon Tests, begun in 1913 by Robert B. Irwin and Dr. Samuel P. Hayes, have been continued for more than thirty years by Dr. Hayes and have produced the Hayes-Binet Intelligence Tests for the Blind which have been widely used in schools for the blind throughout the country. The current edition of these tests, known as the Hayes-Binet Interim Test, represents the cumulative findings of this long experience. The Bellevue-Wechsler Intelligence Test has also been standardized for the blind with satisfactory results. Both tests are available in braille and are accomplanied by instruction manuals for the use of the psychometrist.

Aptitude Tests. Apitude tests for use with the blind are of much more recent origin. While the Seashore Musical Tests have been in use with blind children since the early 1920's, and a braille edition of the Scholastic Aptitude Test of the College Entrance Examination Board was published in 1938, it was not until the emergencies of World War II that any extensive research was done in the area of mechanical aptitude tests. In 1942, the Trainee Acceptance Center of the United States Office of Education, located in Philadelphia undertook, in connection with its major function of selecting candidates for defense training classes and employment in defense plants, to develop mechanical aptitude tests for use with blind candidates. Several tests were devised: a Displacing Test and Turning Test (adapted from the Minnesota Rate of Manipulation series), Assembly and Disassembly Tests from the Pennsylvania Bi-Manual Worksample, and two Toolsample tests from the Pennsylvania Toolsample. These have been used on several hundred blind subjects and are considered satisfactory.

Personality Inventories and Interest Tests. Some use of personality inventories and interest tests (e.g. the Strong, the Bernreuter and the Kuder) has been made, with little or no special adaptation for the blind, but this experience is too limited to justify definite conclusions.

Social Adjustment

One factor which is even more important for the blind than for the seeing is that of personality and social adjustment. Handicapped by inability to perceive all that is going on around them, some blind individuals are self-conscious and awkward in social situations. Unable to see themselves or to compare their appearance with that of others, they must give special attention to the selection and care of apparel and to daily grooming. If the eyes are unsightly, consideration should be given to the wearing of artificial eyes, or of slightly opaque (not black) glasses. Good diction, a cultivated voice, and good manners are all of assistance in offsetting the handicap of blindness.

Ability to move about freely in familiar surroundings is essential, and ability to travel about the community without a guide is a valuable asset in employability. Facility in the skills utilized by the blind (e.g. reading and writing of embossed print, typewriting, etc.) is important for certain vocations. Psychological adjustment to blindness is closely related to emotional stability.

Ideally the blind individual should have solved these problems before he is ready for vocational counselling, but it often happens that he is lacking in one or more of these areas. To help him remedy such deficiencies then becomes the responsibility of the counsellor, although various social agencies may be utilized as resources.

It may also devolve upon the counsellor to suggest ways in which the blind individual may develop self-confidence and initiative by means of reading, correspondence courses, participation in community activities, outdoor sports, and social contacts. Anything which assists a blind person to achieve an outgoing well-rounded personality may be regarded as increasing employability.

Training

The term "training" includes general education, work-adjustment training, pre-vocational training, and vocational or professional training.

It is generally agreed that blind individuals should have more thorough and extensive training than would be provided for seeing persons in the same circumstances because (1) the blind person cannot readily learn by observation and imitation on the job and (2) he should have a "plus" to offer the employer as a partial offset to his handicap.

Training should, so far as practicable, be provided in institutions for the seeing so that (1) the blind individual is subjected to competition with the seeing from the beginning, and (2) he may

enjoy the advantage of graduating from an institution whose standards are widely known. The exception to this rule is training in the use of the tools of blindness (e.g. braille) which is often provided for a group of blind students. As soon as a student has mastered the tools and techniques which will enable him to function without vision he should carry on his training in the seeing world.

General Education. The residential schools and the public school classes for the blind aim to provide the blind student with an education equivalent to that provided by the public elementary and secondary schools. In general it may be said that there is little vocational content in such training.

The blind individual who aspires to higher education attends a regular college or university for the seeing, utilizing braille for note-taking and some reading, the typewriter for assignments and examinations, and a sighted reader for textbook material not available in braille. College study need not be specifically related to a specific vocational objective but is often a means of launching the blind student in the competitive world under favorable conditions, as well as helping him to develop social poise and broader interests. Special care should be taken to ensure that college authorities do not, from misdirected sympathy, display too much leniency toward the blind student or exempt him from the usual requirements.

Pre-vocational Training

Most schools for the young blind include in their curricula training in a variety of handcrafts and manual trades. Though sometimes described as "vocational" subjects, the majority of these courses are essentially pre-vocational and exploratory in nature. In only a few cases do they afford trade-training sufficiently thorough and extensive to prepare the student for immediate employment.

Work-Adjustment Training

Blinded adults who have been out of employment for long periods may have lost their work habits; young blind individuals may never have had work experience to form such habits and may be unaware of kinds of work they can do.

To meet these problems, work-adjustment training is sometimes provided, usually in a special training-center or workshop, for the two-fold purpose of developing work habits and work tolerance, and at the same time determining the abilities of the untried

worker. Such training includes a variety of simple manual operations and is not intended to develop specific skills.

Vocational and Professional Training

Facilities for training for the professions are for the most part open to the blind as to the seeing. The problems of adjustment are the same as in college work—the provision of sighted readers and slight modifications of procedure to make possible the student's use of braille and the typewriter. Schools of theology, social work, journalism, law, osteopathy, massage, and music, as well as teacher-training institutions are among the professional schools which have accepted blind students.

Placement

Placement in its broadest sense—"helping the individual to establish himself in his chosen occupation"—is particularly important for a blind person because of the traditional attitude of the public that the blind are a helpless dependent group. While demonstration by hundreds of blind workers that they can do productive work in competition with the seeing has helped to break down this traditional barrier, many employers and also the general public are still uninformed as to the potentialities of the blind. The services of a third person—the placement agent—and a personalized approach are therefore usually necessary.

Industrial placement has received most attention, especially during World War II, and certain factors are considered essential:

1. Careful analysis of the job to determine the operations which can be performed without sight;
2. Selection of the blind worker on the basis of his productive efficiency;
3. A "sales approach" to the employer to overcome traditional attitudes.

Placements in other occupational fields which involve employer-employee relationships follow approximately the same policies.

On the professional level, the placement agent for the blind is of limited usefulness in securing employment opportunities, and the identification of the blind professional worker with an agency for the blind may be a handicap. In general the sightless individual who aspires to a professional field, should secure his employment opportunities through the same channels as his seeing colleagues, and the counsellor's function is that of suggesting contacts to be made and guiding his efforts. In making applications, emphasis should be placed on professional qualifications, not on the fact of blindness.

In the case of blind persons who wish to establish themselves in independent enterprises, the placement function may consist of advice on the choice of a location, assistance in securing equipment, licenses, and insurance, and help in securing the right kind of publicity for the new undertaking. Care must be taken to encourage independence and at the same time to provide needed assistance in those problems which are at the moment beyond the capacity and experience of the blind individual in question.

Follow up

Continued contact with the blind client after placement is usually necessary, particularly in industrial jobs where the employer, being unused to blind workers, may not know how to meet the unforeseen problems which often arise in connection with changes in the operation or in working conditions, and where the blind worker, fearful of causing extra trouble, may hesitate to suggest modification. Such "follow-up" is directed toward maintaining a satisfactory adjustment of the worker to his job.

The alert counsellor will go farther and encourage the blind individual to increase his skills, seek additional training, or, on the professional level, broaden his horizon of contacts, so that he may be qualified for more responsible or more remunerative work in the future. Because many of the usual opportunities for promotion are closed to the blind, this type of follow-up work is of special importance.

Conclusion

Two basic principles characterize vocational guidance of the blind—(1) that emphasis must be placed on vocational assets, not on the handicaps, and (2) that more intensive and detailed effort is necessary on the part of both the counsellor and the counselee, to offset the handicap of blindness by special skills and superior qualifications.

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